Chapter 8.3
Nethnography:
A Naturalistic Approach Towards Online Interaction

Adriana Andrade Braga
Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the possibilities and limitations of nethnography, an ethnographic approach applied to the study of online interactions, particularly computer-mediated communication. In this chapter, a brief history of ethnography, including its relation to anthropological theories and its key methodological assumptions is addressed. Next, one of the most frequent methodologies applied to Internet settings, that is to treat logfiles as the only or main source of data, is explored, and its consequences are analyzed. In addition, some strategies related to a naturalistic perspective for data analysis are examined. Finally, an example of an ethnographic study, which involves participants of a Weblog, is presented to illustrate the potential for nethnography to enhance the study of CMC.

INTRODUCTION

The introduction of computing technology in recent times produced deep changes on communication processes and practices. The first generations of analysts presented a range of positions regarding the study of these new media environments, evidencing very often the limitations of deterministic evaluations of these social facts (e.g. Lévy, 1993; Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1995). The concrete uses of these new technological resources created other negotiations regarding meanings and identities. The introduction of the personal computer connected to the worldwide Web brought new ways of dealing with old matters. The interaction protocols and the identity production devices presented by these phenomena demand proper techniques of interpretation. Far from the speculation about the impact of computing technology on human communication, this

chapter wishes to present some ways to investigate the social uses of digital environments.

In ordinary interaction, face to face or by telephone, people know how to behave in order to sustain or to cause a certain impression among their acquaintances. Even if there are no formally codified rules, there are tacit methods (Garfinkel, 1967) that allow ordinary members of society to expect some specific responses during social situations. Computer-mediated communication (CMC), as a novel medium, demands from its participants a certain degree of improvisation when facing unexpected or new situations. In these cases, patterns of conduct taken from other contexts are adapted, in order to create new tacit rules for behavior within these settings. As these new social environments demand improvisation and adaptation from the participants to deal with unexpected situations, it is argued that it also demands from the analyst a combination or adaptation of methods originally designed to investigate different contexts, in order to fully grasp the specificity of CMC.

The study of social behavior on Internet environments presents a great methodological challenge. A first remark on method refers to the historical period in which the research takes place. These forms of interaction are recent phenomena, and they depart from individual and group strategies not inherited, but acquired through the use and adaptation of already-existing rules, taken from other relational contexts. Such strategies are applied on a case-by-case basis, according to situational demands, prior to an explicit formal or even tacit codification. These rules-in-the-making will consolidate later, as online cultural activities go on.

Thus, the aim of this chapter is to present a methodological perspective through which social interaction in online environments can be studied naturalistically, that is, focusing mainly on the observation of naturally occurring phenomena.

In order to explore the possibilities and limitations of an ethnographic approach applied to the study of online interaction, a brief history of ethnography will first be addressed, including its relation with anthropological theories, and its key methodological assumptions. Next, one of the most frequent methodologies applied to Internet settings is discussed, that is to treat logfiles as the only or main source of data, and some of its consequences are analyzed. In addition, some strategies related to a naturalistic perspective for data analysis are examined. Finally, an example of an ethnographic study is presented which involves participants of a Weblog to illustrate the potential for nethnography to enhance the study of CMC.

This chapter presents aspects of the methodology developed in a research project concluded in 2006 that investigated communicational interaction within an Internet environment, the 'guestbook' of a Brazilian Weblog dedicated to contemporary motherhood, called "Mothern" (mother + modern), available at www.mothern. blogspot.com. This Weblog was chosen because of its unique combination of both traditional and modern concepts of femininity, coping with all the contradictions derived from this perspective. Besides that, the Weblog Mothern had an astonishing career on the Internet, generating two best-selling books, an editorial section on a feminine magazine, and a TV show – now in its second season. The multi-method perspective detailed in this chapter was designed to grasp the concrete uses and consumption of this communication technology by the participants. Its key assumptions, once taken with proper care, can be applied to the study of online interaction in other Internet settings, such as social networking sites.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC TRADITION

Ethnography was conceived and historically applied to the study of groups in face-to-face contact with the ethnographer, in which his/her experience is taken as a data source. The unique interpersonal

16 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/nethnography-naturalistic-approach-towards-online/8885

Related Content

Secure and Effective Key Management Using Secret Sharing Schemes in Cloud Computing
Shahin Fatimaand Shish Ahmad (2020). *International Journal of e-Collaboration (pp. 1-15).*
www.irma-international.org/article/secure-and-effective-key-management-using-secret-sharing-schemes-in-cloud-computing/244177

J.C.R. Licklider and the Rise of Interactive and Networked Computing
Tami K. Tomasello (2010). *Handbook of Research on Social Interaction Technologies and Collaboration Software: Concepts and Trends (pp. 1-10).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/licklider-rise-interactive-networked-computing/36013

Onto-VP2M: A New Approach to Model and Manage Collaborative Process Versions using Contexts and Ontologies
Fatma Ellouze, Mohamed Amine Chaâbane, Eric Andonoffand Rafik Bouaziz (2017). *International Journal of e-Collaboration (pp. 39-62).*
www.irma-international.org/article/onto-vp2m/207357

The Marketing Prospects of Consumer Trust in Banking Services to Reduce Perceived Financial Risk and Enhance Intention to Use Internet Banking
Zhangzhi Li (2022). *International Journal of e-Collaboration (pp. 1-13).*
www.irma-international.org/article/the-marketing-prospects-of-consumer-trust-in-banking-services-to-reduce-perceived-financial-risk-and-enhance-intention-to-use-internet-banking/307128

Socio-Technical Influences on Virtual Research Environments
Marisa Ponti (2012). *Advancing Collaborative Knowledge Environments: New Trends in E-Collaboration (pp. 89-101).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/socio-technical-influences-virtual-research/61186